

VZCZCXYZ0000
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBU #0558/01 1311926
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 111926Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3698
INFO RUCNMER/MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 000558

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2039

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [AR](#)

SUBJECT: Argentina Elections: VP Cobos Still Popular in
Home Province of Mendoza, But Victory Not A Sure Thing

Ref: (A) Buenos Aires 0442 (B) Buenos Aires (0429)

Classified by Ambassador Wayne for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

11. (C) Summary: Argentine Vice President Cobos's presidential aspirations are riding on the fate of the slate of candidates he is backing in the June 28 congressional mid-term elections. Currently, his slate for Mendoza's five national deputy slots and three Senate seats is favored to win 40% of the vote. The same polls show the center-right Democratic party drawing 20% of the vote in Mendoza, coming slightly ahead of the ruling Peronist party. Despite these rosy numbers, Mendoza's political cognoscenti say that a Cobos victory is not a "sure thing," noting the popularity of Peronist mayors running for Congress and the lack of support from prominent leaders of the Radical party (Cobos's former party). Even Cobos's own former Vice Governor acknowledges that Mendocinos are "finicky voters," saying that "frontrunners have never won" the province, before quickly adding that he hoped "Cobos will be the first." End Summary.

Cobos Ahead in the Polls, PJ Fights for Second Place

12. (C) Mendoza is Argentina's fourth most populous province. Poloff traveled to Mendoza on April 24-25 to meet with local politicians and political analysts to see how the mid-term legislative elections are shaping up in the hometown province of Vice President Julio Cobos. National polls rank Cobos as the most popular politician in the country, with the highest approval and positive image ratings, reinforcing the perception that he is the "leader of the opposition" ever since he cast a tie-breaking vote in the Senate in July 2008 against a controversial Kirchner proposal to increase duties on agricultural exports. According to local polls, Federal Consensus (CONFE) -- the Cobos-backed slate for Mendoza's five national deputy slots and three Senate seats -- is currently favored by 40% of the electorate. The same polls show the center-right Democratic Party polling at 20% of the vote, slightly ahead of the ruling Peronist Party (PJ), which enjoys support of only 18% of the electorate.

PJ: Political Cohesion is our Greatest Strength

13. (C) During the late April visit, PJ leaders boasted that the party finalized its slates without the need for internal elections. When asked for their thoughts on former President and current PJ party head Nestor Kirchner's proposal for Governors to run for Congress (ref b), they claimed that PJ Governor Celso Jaque had no intentions of doing so because he wants to complete his

term as governor. They asserted, however, that "the positions belong to the party, not the candidates." Other analysts told poloff that, due to Jaque's precipitous drop in popularity, the local Peronist party was not going to allow him to name any of his own candidates to the PJ ticket.

14. (C) Without acknowledging that they were trailing in the polls, PJ leaders indicated that their party's cohesion was its greatest strength. They noted that unlike the Radicals (UCR), who expelled Cobos for breaking ranks with the Radical party to join President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's (CFK) Victory Front (FPV) ticket in 2007, the PJ "never disciplines those that leave, they just welcome them back to the fold." When asked for their opinion of Vice President Cobos, they called him an unscrupulous "traitor." CFK should have known better than to name him his running mate, they argued, saying if he betrayed his own party, it was only a matter of time before he betrayed her.

CONFEE: Luck, Not Skill, Accounts for Cobos's Popularity

15. (C) In a separate meeting with poloff, Juan Carlos Jaliff, Cobos's former Vice-Governor and now head of his CONFEE party, painted a different story. "Cristina betrayed Cobos first," he claimed. He explained that Cobos agreed to be CFK's running mate because CFK's husband, former President Nestor Kirchner (NK), had sold him on the idea of a post-Peronist alliance, along the lines of Chile's Concertacion, where individual parties retain their identities but work in concert for a common agenda. According to Jaliff, NK betrayed that vision shortly after his wife won the elections by announcing his intention to run for President of the Peronist party. Cobos was very disillusioned by this decision, as it demonstrated NK's embrace of old politics, Jaliff said.

16. (C) When asked for his opinion of Cobos, Jaliff simply called him "lucky." In Napoleon's search for generals, Jaliff said, his advisors would present him with only the best candidates. After reviewing each candidate's skills and credentials, Napoleon would then ask "but is he lucky?" Jaliff explained that Cobos never had any ambitions to become Vice President. He never intended to become a national hero by casting his tie-breaking vote in the Senate. As governor of Mendoza, Jaliff said, it took Cobos six months to get his first meeting with then-President Nestor Kirchner. And then, all of a sudden, he was asked to be CFK's Vice Presidential nominee. "Cobos is not charismatic. He's just lucky. The people connect with him because he is normal," Jaliff stated.

17. (C) Turning to the mid-term elections, Jaliff described the race as a national referendum on the Kirchner agenda and predicted that CFK would lose her congressional majority. He dismissed press speculation that CFK would resign if she loses (ref A), arguing that "Peronists never leave power voluntarily. And even when they do, the alternative to Peronism is Peronism. Take Nestor Kirchner for example. He is the antithesis of (former President Carlos) Menem."

18. (C) Jaliff said that the CONFEE would join forces with the Radical Party (UCR) and cited local polls that give Cobos an electoral advantage over the ruling PJ and the center-right Democratic party. Jaliff, however, described Mendocinos as "finicky voters," saying that "frontrunners have never won" the province, before quickly adding that he hoped "Cobos will be the first." Although he expects the Kirchners to lose the mid-terms, he is worried about post-electoral unrest. "You can beat the Peronists in elections; the problem is they won't let you govern," Jaliff concluded.

19. (C) Comment: Mendoza is Argentina's fourth largest province, but with 4.2% of the national vote, it will be

electing only five of the 127 deputies up for election this year and three of the 72 senators. Given the intensity of the Kirchners' animosity for the highly popular Vice President, the stakes there have escalated out of proportion with the number of seats at stake. It is widely assumed that the Kirchners will seek to derail Cobos's prospects for a presidential run in 2011 by defeating him or minimizing his team's margin of victory in his home province in this year's congressional election. As a result, there is a great deal riding on the electoral outcome in Mendoza.

WAYNE